



**The Woman Who Dueled
with Aaron Burr...and Won**

The Remarkable Rise of Eliza Jumel

By Margaret A. Oppenheimer

THE PRESS WAS ON HAND when 78 lots of the famous Jumel estate — among the last to be sold — were auctioned at New York City's Real Estate Exchange on April 3, 1888. The commentary from a reporter for the *New York Herald* was as breathless as the sale room itself: "So immense was the crowd that it was difficult for the auctioneer's clerks and the representatives of the press to attend to their work. Several of the numerous ladies present had to be taken either to the gallery or to some of the auctioneer's stands to save them from being actually crushed."

Not only were professional men of every ilk in attendance, from politicians and lawyers to bookmakers and tavern keepers, but "heirs of estates adjacent to the property offered came in troops, and families with cousins and aunts only swelled the mass in such a manner as to make the atmosphere of the Exchange almost intolerable."¹

The properties up for sale had been owned by a New Yorker, then practically a household name, but mostly forgotten today. Born in poverty in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1775, Betsy Bowen had fought her way up from the workhouse and indentured servitude to become Madame Eliza Jumel: a well-traveled grande dame conversant in two languages, an art collector who claimed friends at the French court, the wife (briefly) of a vice president of the United States and a landed proprietor who owned a good chunk of Upper Manhattan. By the time she died at age 90 on July 16, 1865, she was one of New York's wealthiest women.

Her real estate holdings in the city were immense. In the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan, Jumel owned an elegant mansion built in 1765, as well as unimproved acreage that added up to a staggering 783 city lots. Farther downtown she possessed two 20-by-60-foot built-up lots on the northwest corner of 41st Street and Seventh Avenue, just south of what would become Times Square.

Most remuneratively, she had holdings



The country home Eliza and Stephen Jumel purchased in 1810, today a museum.

Photo: Tom Stoelker. Courtesy Morris-Jumel Mansion.

in the Financial District: 150 Broadway (three blocks north of Wall Street) and just around the corner, 71 and 73 Liberty Street. All three buildings were leased profitably as retail space and offices. Nor should we forget her upstate coda: 175 city and rural lots — amounting to more than 200 acres of land — in the bustling resort town of Saratoga Springs, together with a comfortable summer home, Rose Cottage. In a testimony to the drawing power of longevity and wealth, *The New York Times* honored her with an obituary of over 3,000 words.

Jumel attended George Washington's inauguration, the *Times* said, and was called by Benjamin Franklin his "fairly queen." She charmed Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette, and enchanted Patrick Henry, too.² True? None of it. But the legends obscured a more interesting story — the remarkable rise of a self-made woman.

The classic American rags-to-riches story has a male protagonist: a poor boy who works his way to wealth. The model didn't work for poor girls, because the jobs available to them paid poorly and offered little upward mobility. Marrying up was uncommon, too. Without birth or money to offer, young women from struggling households rarely attracted potential husbands better off than they were themselves. Eliza Jumel was the rare exception, a poor girl who made good. Her success demanded a rare mix of determination

and intelligence, coupled with a willingness to do whatever it took to get ahead.

The young Betsy Bowen began her ascent by moving to New York City. There, where no one knew her, she shed her old identity, rebranding herself more elegantly as Eliza. She worked at least briefly as an extra in the theater. What she achieved was not star status on the stage, but something better for a woman who hoped to advance in the world. She met — whether at the theater or in the neighborhood where she lived — a wealthy, French-born merchant, Stephen Jumel. Their marriage in 1804 — a connection she knitted without parents to negotiate for her, financial assets to flaunt or prominent family connections to offer — vaulted Eliza into the upper middle class.

The Jumels purchased a country seat in today's Upper Manhattan as well as swaths of farmland and the parcel of prime downtown real estate at the corner of Broadway and Liberty Street that would one day be the most valuable item in Eliza's estate. Jumel enjoyed the trappings of prosperity. She kept a carriage, worshiped at Trinity Church (after a strategic conversion to Episcopalianism) and gave a niece, Mary, whom she and Stephen took into their home as an adoptive daughter, all the advantages of a genteel upbringing. Acceptance into New York's elite circles proved elusive. But her origins weren't as closely scrutinized when the little family moved to Stephen's native France after the fall of Napoleon I.

Previous page: Eliza Jumel in Rome in 1854, with a great-niece and great-nephew, whom she raised. Painted by Alcide Ercole.



The Jumel crypt at Trinity Cemetery & Mausoleum in Upper Manhattan.

In Paris, Jumel took pleasure in building a sizable collection of European paintings. She socialized with aristocrats at the court of Louis XVIII and received a bow of recognition from the king. The economy was shaky, however, collapsing first under the Panic of 1819 and then the Panic of 1825. Stephen put his and his wife's country home in New York and the 36 acres of land immediately surrounding it in trust for Eliza, possibly at her urging. They would be hers for life, free to manage as she wished. Even if Stephen predeceased her, she would not have to worry about spending her widowhood in penury. But for a woman who had known poverty, a mansion and 36 acres were not enough. Jumel acted to ensure her future security.

In 1826 she returned to the United States from France to look after her and Stephen's other American investments: farmlands in Washington Heights and central New York, and their Broadway and Liberty Street buildings. Using a power of attorney Stephen had given her, she put almost all their remaining real estate—including the valuable downtown parcel—in trust for herself for life. Thus she transmuted herself into a *rara avis*: a married woman who was a landed proprietor in her own right.

In 1828 her husband left France to rejoin her in the United States. His death, on May 22, 1832, increased her wealth. She collected on old debts he was owed by

insurance companies and the French government for ships seized during the Napoleonic wars. Then she fought his brother and sister in court to keep as much of the money as possible, investing her takings in real estate in soon-to-boom Saratoga Springs. She improved the Broadway and Liberty Street property in Manhattan, too, replacing two three-story buildings with three five-story structures that would ensure her a comfortable income from rents. Using a tactic popular among widows, she probably funded this last initiative with money that was in the mansion at the time of her husband's death, spending it secretly before the estate was inventoried.

Jumel proved a careful steward of her wealth. She kept her land and properties leased, moving swiftly to evict tenants who stopped paying rent and pursuing them in court for the monies due. If she was unable to lease a piece of agricultural acreage, she would find a farmer willing to work the land in exchange for half the profits from the crops he raised. There is evidence that she kept up with developments in scientific farming: surviving leases for her Saratoga lands show that she paid for clover, timothy and plaster to improve the soil.³

She made only one truly disastrous decision when it came to guarding her financial security. That was her choice of a second husband. On July 1, 1833, only 13 months after Stephen's death,

Jumel remarried at the age of 58. Her new spouse was former Vice President Aaron Burr. Although his reputation was blighted—he had killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804 and then made a quasi-legal attempt to seize Spanish lands in Texas and Mexico, for which he was tried and acquitted in federal court—Burr was born into the American elite, able to move in social circles to which Jumel had long craved entry. At 77 he remained a brilliant lawyer and a man of great charm.

Yet Burr was also a chronic debtor. He squandered money as fast as he could borrow it and then kept borrowing more. His new wife's fortune was not exempt. He spent Jumel's money with abandon. A year after the marriage, she filed for divorce. Since the only ground for severing a marriage in New York in 1834 was adultery, she arranged for a servant of Burr's to testify to having observed her employer disporting himself with a lover one month after the marriage.

Burr fought back with manufactured evidence of his own, accusing Jumel of adultery with eight men—a divorce would not be awarded if the complainant in the case had been unfaithful. Jumel had the more convincing story. She won her case.

The unhappy episode cost Jumel \$13,000 that Burr ran through during the first few months of their union—the equivalent in buying power of \$378,000 today—not to mention the legal fees for the divorce. Later, however, she turned the brief marriage into an asset. Traveling in Europe as Mrs. Burr, widow of the vice president, she used her status to arrange a good marriage for a much-loved great-niece. When she died in 1865, she was worth at least \$1 million—approximately \$15 million today.

Jumel is not a heroine without blemishes. In spite of the wealth she attained, she could be tightfisted, depriving servants of what they were owed. She put herself first, when push came to shove. When she placed most of the Jumel lands in trust for herself, she left her loving husband with practically no property of his own. Although she may have acted to protect their holdings from his creditors, her actions were also self-serving. It is hard to say whether protecting their joint assets or ensuring her future was her primary motivation. » *continued on page 39*

TRIVIA QUIZ

By Bob Shabazian

claimed that Hamilton owned at least part of the *Sun*, but White could not substantiate those claims. White also points to the intriguing possibility that Hamilton was intimately involved in the rise of Cornelius Vanderbilt. Again, however, the evidence is thin and bound to be controversial. It is also not clear if Hamilton was merely a stockbroker, as some described him, or if he was really what today would be considered a hedge fund manager.

A business or financial historian ought to build on White's work to see if he or she can find new sources or reinterpret the ones that White has already (painstakingly) discovered. White is a fine cultural historian, but clearly his grasp of business and financial concepts is lacking, as repeatedly shown by his clumsy language

in sections dealing with insurance and banking in an otherwise extremely well-written book. The cultural components of the book, from New Yorkers' attitudes toward interracial marriage to beliefs about hair texture and skin complexion, are absolutely fascinating and well worth the price of admission. **\$**

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Jumel was a litigious woman, too, who was not beyond adjusting facts with abandon in order to make her case. In a way it is fitting that her estate would be tied up in the courts for years, reaching the US Supreme Court twice. The Jumel will case would be compared by contemporaries to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the endless lawsuit in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.

Yet Jumel succeeded on her own terms. She brought up a niece, great-niece and great-nephew, arranging good marriages for both the girls. She died a wealthy woman, safe under her own roof. She had herself buried imposingly in a granite crypt. At least three streets in Manhattan and Saratoga Springs proudly bear her name.⁴ Her cottage in Saratoga is still pointed out to tourists, and her New York City mansion survives as a museum. In a quiet corner of Washington Heights, we can enter her house, admire her furnishings, scrutinize her portrait and marvel at the life she made. **\$**

Margaret A. Oppenheimer holds a Ph.D. in art history from New York University. This article draws in part on material adapted from in her most recent book, The Remarkable Rise of Eliza Jumel: The Story of Marriage and Money in the Early Republic (Chicago Review Press, 2016), with permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Notes

1. "The Great Jumel Sale." *New York Herald*. April 4, 1888. 8.
2. "Obituary. Madam Eliza B. Jumel." *The New York Times*. July 18, 1865.
3. Two such leases survive in the Jumel Papers at the New-York Historical Society, in box 2, folder E, and box 3, folder G.
4. Jumel Terrace and Jumel Place in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, and another Jumel Place in Saratoga Springs.

1. The Museum's "Worth Its Weight" exhibit features the world's oldest known gold coin. From when does the coin date?
2. Why was Lillian Vernon's listing on the American Stock Exchange groundbreaking?
3. Alexander Hamilton's portrait currently appears on the face of the \$10 bill. What image is depicted on its reverse?
4. What was the outcome of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938?
5. What Congressional legislation led to the formation of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)?
6. In what regions did the three American gold rushes take place?
7. What financial leader is credited with "democratizing" investment, given his innovations aimed to assist individual investors?
8. In what city was the Bank of the United States established?
9. How many Federal Reserve districts are there?
10. Whose portrait is on the \$2 bill?

1. Circa 564-550 BC. 2. It was the first company owned by a woman to be listed on the Amex. 3. The US Treasury building. 4. It established the first minimum wage at 25 cents an hour and limited the work week to 44 hours. 5. The Banking Act of 1933. 6. North Carolina/Georgia, California and Alaska. 7. Charles "Chuck" Schwab. 8. Philadelphia. 9. 12. 10. Thomas Jefferson